

Seventy-fifth Anniversary Series

Islamic World—Syria

The Land
of
Veiled Problems

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One of the most striking things which greets the traveler in Mohammedan lands is the woman with the veiled face. To one accustomed to the freedom of the west the heavily shrouded figures of the women are most significant. Silently they move about presumably able to see what is going on but absolutely hidden from public gaze by their black or variegated colored veils. Even in countries where western civilization has modified the custom to the extent of the abandonment of the black veil it has not permitted the entire discarding of the covering of the face. In the streets of Cairo one sees many women with a tenuous white veil of softest material concealing the lower half of the face and lending just enough of mystery and subtle charm to tempt one to another look rather than to avert one's gaze.

In Syria as part of the Turkish Empire the veiled woman is constantly in evidence. The writer, when hurrying to board a tram car in the streets of Beirut, was politely warned from taking his place with the

Note—In illustration on front cover are shown three Minarets of the Great Mosque at Damascus: That on the roof is a fine specimen of Arabic architecture; it has three galleries, tapers toward a ball, crowned by a crescent: That on the right is the "Bride's Minaret": That in the centre, Madinet Sa", or "Minaret of Jesus", is from the tradition that Jesus will take his place on its summit at the beginning of the last judgment.

caution that unconsciously he was encroaching on the part reserved for women. Looking up he felt that numerous eyes were fixed upon him from behind veiled faces, whether in dismay or amusement, he could not tell. Perhaps in no better way can one describe the present situation in the Turkish Empire and in our Syria Mission than by saying that it is one of veiled problems. Politically, socially and religiously, there is an air of mystery which baffles the wisest prophet and most acute observer. The few days spent in Syria en route to India contained many illustrations of this fact.

I. The Veiled Political Problem

On the boat crossing from Brindisi to Port Said was a young Greek from the island of Zante, which, together with Cephalonia, lies off the west coast of Greece opposite Ithaca. From Zante five thousand men had gone to the Greek frontier to guard against Turkish encroachment. There was a stern look on this young man's face as he said that there had been a Holy Alliance formed between the Balkan States to settle once for all the matter of the Turkish persecution of Christians. In his opinion the political causes of the war were entirely secondary to the religious. He could see no prospect of a permanent settlement of the question or hope of peace until Christian and Mohammedan had decided the matter by a holy war. This was probably an extreme view. I did not find it held by others with



A Mohammedan Woman in street dress, Syria

whom I talked. A less pessimistic opinion but none the less tinged with mystery emerged in a conversation with several Syrians. Not once or twice but almost universally did I hear the opinion expressed that there was no hope for the Turkish Empire from within. This is said to be the thought of Christian and Mohammedan alike, although the latter would not express it openly. The idea seems to be that what England has done for Egypt some strong power must do for Turkey. When I inquired what nation the people were looking to, I got the answer, "England, first; Germany, second; with France a possible but poor third." In one instance true Syrian politeness led a man to say: "Of course, we would prefer your country to them all." As I left Beirut in a ship crowded to suffocation with emigrants, most of whom were destined for America, I could not but wonder if there might not be some grain of truth in the wish even though there could be no prospect of its fulfilment in any other way than by the quiet but persuasive influence of Christian teaching. The fact is that Syria is rapidly being denuded of its best young life because of the hopelessness of the present situation. At the time of the establishment of the Constitution there was a sudden revival of patriotic zeal and hope. For a few months national enthusiasm burned brightly but it was only for a while. The conditions are no better and some say they are worse than before the revolution. While we were in Beirut the grounds at the bar-

racks were full of horses and mules taken from their owners for purposes of war, and soldiers, reluctant for their task, were listlessly going to the front. In the presence of conflicting opinions one dare not venture a forecast, but a reflection of the most thoughtful opinion would seem to indicate that if the Turks are defeated in this war and their territory partitioned, Syria will fall to France, a denouement which the Syrian very much fears. As one dwells on the mystery concealed behind the veil of the political situation he cannot help but wish that he could read the minds of the great powers, England, Russia, Germany, France and Italy, and know just what their silence means while their lesser neighbors of the Balkan States are grappling with the Turk.

II. The Veiled Social Problem

A country's safety lies in the love of its people. The willingness of her sons to suffer for her has always been the basis of a nation's prosperity. At the present time Syria's people seem to have no ambition for their country. While its general appearance would indicate that the land of Syria was hostile to cultivation, it is a fact that both in climate and soil there are possibilities of development. As one sees the rough and rocky fields when scratched by the old-fashioned single-stick plow yielding itself to the growth of the grapevine, olive and the mulberry tree, he wonders what would be the result if Syria's people could be persuaded to remain at

home and experiment with modern agricultural implements. There seems, however, little likelihood of this. A former representative of the United States became quite enthusiastic on this subject and suggested the introduction of farm machinery. He argued for his proposition on the ground that modern methods would enable them to do in a few hours what now took many men several days. He was met by the rejoinder, "What, then, would these men do the rest of the time?" He abandoned his enthusiasm and the Syrian farmer, with his primitive plow, still lazily follows his slow-stepping bullocks. We visited a large silk mill where upwards of a hundred spindles were busily whirring. I asked what the power was that turned the machinery and was taken to the rear of the building where four men were patiently turning great iron cranks. In a country where there is no more ambition than this there is little to hold the youth of the land after they have heard the somewhat highly colored stories of America or other more progressive lands. It is astonishing how many of this land are in touch with America. At a school in Sidon, when the teacher asked all the children who had relatives in America to rise, practically the whole school was on its feet. At a little wayside inn of the most primitive character there was hanging on the wall a picture of a fine looking young man in European dress. I asked the proprietor about him and learned that he was his son who was a successful business man of Yonkers, N. Y.



Street Scene in Tripoli

The inn-keeper himself had been in America and seeing the effect of Christianity on men's lives had become a Christian and was doing what he could as a missionary by speaking to those who stopped at the inn. This eagerness of the Syrian to emigrate makes a problem for the missionary. It forces our schools to teach the English language. Otherwise they could get no pupils, much less any who would pay the small fee required. In doing so they

distinctly complicate Syria's problem, for they put it into the power of the young men to leave the country. Conditions such as these leave the social problem of Syria shrouded in mystery and create a veiled problem that no one can penetrate.

III. The Veiled Religious Problem

The most difficult of all Syria's problems is the religious one. On the one hand the missionary must face the solid wall of Mohammedanism which, as yet, except in the most general way, has been unyielding. While it is a fact that in the Syrian Protestant College there are upwards of 150 Mohammedans and that in our schools there are occasional recruits, the number who become Christians is comparatively few. The press connected with our mission has not felt it wise to publish any controversial Moslem literature. Were it to do so there would probably immediately come orders from Constantinople to close the press. In spite of the fact that the Young Turkish Party came into power with the cry of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity," conditions have remained essentially the same as they were before the revolution, or, as one man said, worse. Unless one remembers that Islam has not only a religious but a political standing, he cannot possibly estimate Syria's religious problem. The other phase of the religious problem lies in the fact that Syria is the home of a most bewildering number of Christian sects which present religion to the people on its formal and ritualistic side. As we journeyed



A Bedouin Sheik

toward Syria on a French steamer one was attracted by the large number of priests and nuns that were on board. There was a Greek Bishop with his scarlet decorations and a Maronite priest with his sandled feet and brown garb, while sweet-faced nuns were in every corner. Enquiry of the missionaries elicited the answer that these were but typical of the many Orders that were working in Syria. As we listened to the long list of names, including the Orthodox Greek, Greek Catholic, Maronites, Jacobites, Syrian Catholics and many others that have chipped off from the various

sects, we realized what confusion there must be in the minds of those whom the missionary would reach. It is because of these conditions that the work has thus far taken on so largely an educational character. It is a silent influence and awakens emulation on the part of the other churches. With the spread of education will come enlightenment and then will come the breaking down of superstition. As in the political and social problem there is a veiled future, so is it in the religious life of Syria. If Turkey wins in the present war it would probably serve to solidify the Mohammedan Faith. In this case mission work would face another period of patient waiting and possible persecution. If Turkey loses there will be a weakening of Islam with a breaking up of the nation. This will be the missionary's opportunity. If, however, Turkey is partitioned and France controls, her problem would again change, for this would give great prestige to the French Orders. In any event the problem is a concealed one. For the present there is nothing for the missionary to do in the presence of these veiled problems but preach Christ and Him crucified until men beholding Him with unveiled faces may see in Him the solution of their difficulties and hope for their future.

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